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Dissolving the dog

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Dissolving the dog: the home made video

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Abstract
Drawing on an ethnographic study of home-movie makers through a series of cuts between 'clips', this article inquires into what it is to produce videos of a companion animal, in fact, a really big dog, in and around the home. The final clip examines Richard Sennett's misplaced critique of Hannah Ardent's discussion of *animal laborens* and *homo faber*. Arendt's two figures of human work are related to the production and purpose of home-movies of pets. The other series of clips provide a description of how an amateur editing technique is put to use and the modest aesthetic at work in doing so. The home-movie itself is examined through its site of production and the idea of craft (so important to both Sennett and Arendt), only gradually bringing the figure of the animal into focus. The article's form plays off the disjunctures that we find across edit points in home-movies by having 4 distinct sections that do not correspond with the flow of conventional journal articles.

Keywords
Home-movies, craft, Arendt, Sennett, video editing, homo faber

Part 1

From the outset Ricky has not really been happy with the night footage. Usually when editing a movie for his blog he has film of an event that provides the narrative. He might be back from a trip to a site with historical connections to the Scottish Deerhound breed, or, he might have returned from watching a Deerhound show, or, equally, Rogue (Ricky's Deerhound) might have been cavorting on his whip-strong hunting legs chasing down rabbits. There have been other less obvious home-movies, like the time he filmed the huge dog snoozing on the sofa. Nothing else, just a sleeping dog being let lie. Though the dog does eventually wake up and sniff the camcorder. A movie that, to his surprise, generated some of the most profound responses on Youtube from other Deerhound owners. They were comments that captured a sense of love and loss of 'the BEST best friend', as Suki40330 wrote. Of cherished companions that otherwise disappeared from the world without commemoration or documentation.

A dog bred for chasing hare and deer across wide open spaces, Rogue needs two extended excursions daily. During the week, before and after his working day, Ricky obliges by taking Rogue on a loop along an abandoned railway line that skirts the town and then back by the edge of a road that has pavements that peter out into marshy grass and lorry ruts. In the long winter nights three-quarters of the route is on unlit paths far from the orange envelope of the town streetlights. To keep his boots dry and to keep a track on the rabbit-quarrying Rogue, Ricky is reliant on his memory of the whereabouts of the worst quagmires and deepest puddles, and on the sporadic blast of light from his thousand candle torch.

And if on a winter's night an ethnographer should visit, then, here we are, sat in Ricky's study-come-studio in front of the freshly taped collection of clips of Rogue appearing out of, and disappearing into, the black screen of the previous evening. Having just splashed and squelched my way around the same route, following Rogue by torchlight these images are immediately recognisable to me. A grainy screen presence of browns shambling his weekday way along a muddy path, backlit against a similarly brown, if wooden wicker of hawthorn hedges and scrubby ash saplings. The dots of his eyeballs lighting up when he turns around to check that Ricky is keeping up with him.

The clips are 'unusual' we agree. What do we do with them? We contemplate whether and how to make any sort of half coherent movie out of so many almost indistinguishable shots of a dog walking around in the dark. Might such unpromising materials be transformed into a something worthy of adding to the growing collection of Rogue videos on Youtube? Finding the right song is Ricky's regular way of providing a shape to cut to. A track by Shelby Lynne is dragged out of iTunes and dropped onto the audio track of the timeline. He's a longtime fan of country music, plays in a band himself that does the odd wedding and has been listening to the album for a few days now.

As a first step in the editing process proper, the sprawling timeline of assorted clips will be severely pruned. One criteria for the removal of excess are the visual mistakes. Shots of nothing but black with indistinct inky blues of sky. More often, the camera jerking, wobbling and blurring into incoherencies generated by Ricky trying to balance directing the torch with one hand and directing the camera with the other. A second round of trimming begins with Ricky applying fresh criteria to what has been left from the first round. Spotting and deleting sections with that unwanted white-eye from Rogue where he is reflecting the full beam of the torch. Catching and cutting the bleached-out spots on stones and white reflections of rain-coated leaves.

There are further inadvertent artefacts from shooting by torchlight which may, or may not, be cause for disposal of footage. In the low light the camera struggles to focus – this blurring might become a resource. Equally, in the low light, the colour is not coming out – but that, Ricky quickly realises, can give the movie a consistent palette of black, grey and brown. With colour selection criteria in place what can then be discarded are clips where the torch picks out the green of grassy banks.

Sat on his right hand side, I watch Ricky carve out the rough outlines of the video. Select clip. Delete. Drag the playhead to where the camera wobble begins. Command-T. Delete. From forty minutes of footage Ricky is looking to make a three minute film that might be about… something like … 'the journey' or … something. 'Leaving civilisation behind and then coming back, or something like that', he laughs, dispelling too earnest or pretentious an uptake of the story he will try and tell with these black, brown and grey clips[1].

We are born blessed with, and raised by, the TV broadcasters and the film industry. They set the standards that the home-movie almost always fails. When we respond to movies made in the home-movie mode it is often with a sense of embarrassment or amusement, especially when they document the events and characters that are important to their makers. Yet their makers do not think they are making works of art or even works of industry. They are 'making do' with the camera they can afford, the time they have, the film-able events and characters that they find themselves amongst. They are, in their spare time, escaping the toil of their daily labour to become Hannah Arendt's *homo faber*. A maker of videos, furnishing the world, through Youtube, with a new form enduring and intimate materiality. It is not just by their circumstance that domestic dogs find themselves the subject of numerous home videos by their owners. The domestic dog does not toil, it is not a beast of burden, it is though in a relationship with a family and, even for a lone owner, they become companions. Of all the biographies of the family and of friends, the dog's is the most likely to be obliterated and they are the least likely to care about that fact. It is not only that dogs call upon us to inscribe them into the history of our families and friendships, it is also that living with a dog so often turns to a contemplation of the relations between human and canine's relative mortality and immortality. A contemplation that is sometimes worked out through making videos.

Part 2

The important works on home-movie making begin by defending it from misunderstanding or, at worst snobbery. James Moran's [1] wide-ranging examination of the home video does so by arguing that "the home mode provides an authentic, active mode of media production for representing everyday life." p59. Through recordings of the household on special occasions, of children at play, of DIY projects, of family holidays in the mountains or on the beaches, the home-movie situates home affectively in a wider world [2] as Gillian Rose also argues for family photography [3]. Moran also suggests, the home-movie allows family members to circulate their own depictions of their family, thus reproducing and transforming the meaning of family. He provides the sense of the movie as a way of building legends that are both told in the movie at the time but are then open to re-telling by later generations.

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[1] The night described here was one selected from eighteen months of fieldwork spent in editing suites.

Central to the recording, the showing and the preservation of so many of the home-movies are there part in the performance and commemoration of the central family events of births, birthdays, holidays, marriages and even deaths [2].

For my part, after several months searching for home-movies on Youtube, with Moran's comments in mind, I was coming to terms with the puzzling scarcity of home-movies of births, deaths and the rest. There are a few there, hidden in Youtube's abundance by home-movie makers simply failing or refusing to label or keyword them as such. A preliminary explanation of why there are only such limited numbers of home-movies on Youtube comes from Moran himself as he notes that they are used "to construct a liminal space in which practitioners may explore and negotiate the competing demands of their public, communal, and private, personal identities" [1] p60. Those home-movies that did not make it to Youtube were shared elsewhere as part of the very process of drawing the boundaries around the public and private spheres of those families. In a reflexive relationship, Youtube, like other social media, has brought with it the re-drawing and reconsideration of what families are willing to show and to share, and where they are willing to share those representations of themselves [4, 5, 6]. There were, I knew from a number of other interviews with home-movie makers, more private forms of circulation through DVDs sent by mail, password-protected Youtube videos. Surviving from a celluloid and tape era, there were get-togethers in sitting rooms where more distant family members would be summoned to watch the wedding video or Jimmy's first few steps across the sitting room. Meantime, I persevered in scanning through the scads of amateur movies on Youtube around which there was little doubt that they had been made at home and I continued to wonder what all of that material might yet tell us about the home-movie.

Because our project was focused editing practices, clips that were uploaded without trimming or assembling remained irrelevant, yet that left plenty of instructional guides, extreme sports adventures and, in particular, pets. And in re-considering their legitimacy as potential home-movies, if not quite the ones that Moran might have imagined, I had to accept that they were relevant to one criterion that our project[2] on video editors cohered around: the category of place in which they were made. In some ways it was an obvious mistake to make: to look for the home as topic rather than the home as a workplace for the assembly of movies. Shifting away from what these movies represent to how they were made, these short (and sometimes long) movies acquire their character, in part, through the fact that they are made with amateur equipment, as a hobby and usually by one untrained person. In fact these were the very characteristics that the major works on the home-movie by Patricia Zimmerman [7] and Richard Chalfen [8] had concentrated on.

What, then, is the home-movie if we think about it in terms of fabrication in a particular workplace as Rose [3] does in thinking about family photographs? One answer lies in the suburban garage, and takes us back in time to a previous generation of craftsmen fashioning cribs, kitchen chairs and dinghies out of wood [9]. The hobbyist had a certain reliance on nails, glue and G-clamps. These were the ready-to-hand technologies and techniques that allowed them to build their gifts for their families and friends. Home-movie makers are a newer generation of hobbyists, what Campbell calls the 'craft consumer', reliant on new forms of joinery, working as late into the night as their parents once did [10]. The domestic geography of craft has changed with the home-movie makers seldom using the garage or the

cellar preferring the home office or study where the domestic computer equipment is already installed [11]. The picture of a succession of craftsmen is not quite right because home-movie making with super 8 existed in parallel with home joinery and boat-building and continues to do so in the present day. Patricia Zimmerman [7] tracked the early history of the craft through its technological advances and borrowings from the professionals and she shows it was a rare and costly hobby. Today cameras that record video, and computers that can edit it, are as common as g-clamps and glue, or, on reflection, perhaps even more common.

Those who once worked with wood and glue have not straightforwardly been replaced by a new generation who work with video clips and edit points. What the comparison helps bring to light is the qualities that they share: the time set aside, the labour involved, the idea of making something at home, the gift for family or friends and the response to that gift [12,13]. Before turning toward the changing social aspects of craft I want to stay a little longer with the glue and g-clamps and consider how particular moving images and sounds are fixed together. At the outset of commercial film production the films of the silent movies were indeed glued together; editing was predominantly absent from the process of film production aside from a little bit of trimming. This was because for the earliest industrial production the quick and easy way to create narrative films for profitable distribution was to record theatre pieces inside a boxed-off stage [14]. The glue merely held together two long strips of film of an ongoing stage performance in front of the camera without jumps in perspective, time or parallel action. As part of cinema's emergence the cut becomes a place to create an array of grammatical relationships between clips [15, 16]. Drawing upon the alternation of images first developed in lantern slideshows the joint was replaced by the ideas of the cut, the sequence and the transition [17].

It is the frippery and high visibility of transitions that tends to captures the home movie maker's attention the first time they sit down with a video editing app. They can choose from a number of spectacular transitions through sideways slides, spinning clips, zooms, heart shapes or flames. Having cured themselves of the all but ironic use of these arresting transitions, the seasoned home-movie makers learn how to use a shortlist of three: the fade-in, the fade-out and the cross-cut dissolve. The latter is the most common and it is, simply, when one clip fades more or less rapidly into the next. In using these transitions home-movie makers also begin to come to terms with the ideas that both cuts and transitions raise for them. To mention but a few: continuity, metamorphosis, progress, parallel action and, of course, narrative.

Karl Reisz [18] in his classic work on professional editing notes that the cross-cut dissolve conventionally serves to indicate the passing of time or it is used for a flashback. For the amateur editor the cross-cut dissolve fits to a different regime of production. When intervening footage of one or another event is cut out, during an edit, it leaves a hole that turns into a jump-cut. While the latter is a marker of French new wave cinema, in the home-movie it is a tell-tale sign of lack of knack. The jump-cut is hard to smooth away for the home-movie editor because there is no store of cutaways, alternate angles, close-ups, mid-shots, reverse set-ups. It is for this very reason that cuts and sequences barely feature in the home editor's repertoire compared to their professional counterpart. Looking for additional footage the home editor quickly scrapes the bottom of the clip bin. Nor does the amateur have foley and ambient sound, and seldom do they have a boom or lapel microphone recording separate audio. Moreover cutting the camera's onboard microphone audio, which is usually the only audio they have, leads to distracting snaps, clicks or pops. The more able home editor uses a J or L cut to smooth the audio joints between these shots, these are cuts

where the audio is carried across the video cut and cut at a point where it will not produce an audio artefact. For the majority, the cross-cut dissolve works just as well and is quicker. And then there are the mis-matches in lighting, exposure and white balance which the cross-cut also blends and mends. Otherwise the home-movie maker would have try and understand the technical complexities of the three way colour-corrector, lumina, de-saturation and worse. With only their evenings free, the cross-cut dissolve is, then, more than the glue, it is the short-cut and the repair tool that serves the domestic workplace so well.

Part 3

Ricky at work, editing. Watching him at work is intriguing. Watching the work itself is perplexing. There is no proper flow. It jumps around. A couple of bars of music begin and end abruptly, mid bar. There is a cross-dissolve that lasts three seconds where I do not know which clip is of what. It helps that I have been with him from the outset of this process. But even then it becomes bewildering. It does not, and cannot, have the more easy-to-grasp appearances of watching the finished sequence.

A reminder and a little repetition will help us here. Once the clips are trimmed to a suitable size and dropped onto the timeline the stage arrives when the home-movie editor is building the movie itself. It is then that the cross-cut dissolve is applied as the forgiving glue, creating continuity where we would otherwise see none. Having applied that first cross-cut dissolve, Ricky plays it back, he is sitting on the left and I am on the right:
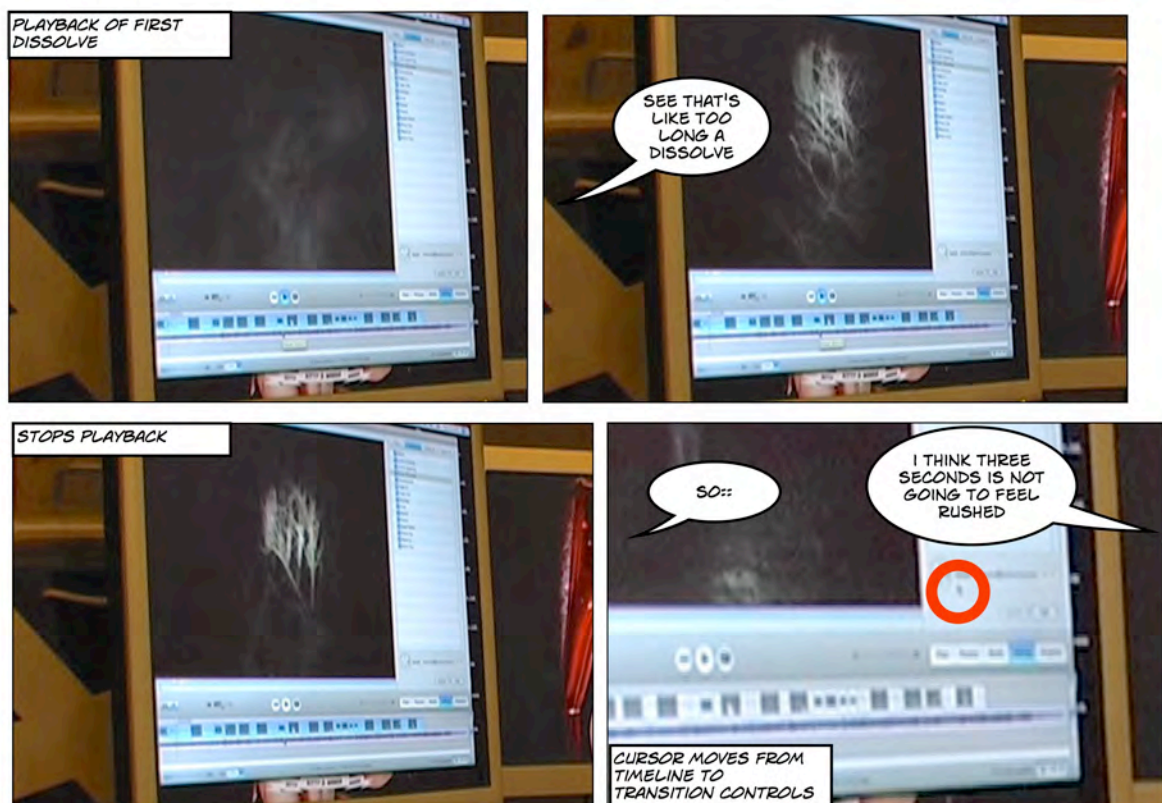

Transcript 1 – Assessing the cross-cut dissolve

This first assessment of this first attempt at setting the length of the transition is that is it not yet the right length. In this situation the commentary, made for the benefit of the

ethnographer, marks out what the editor is encountering and what he is currently doing. Commentary makes available his ongoing reasoning in ways similar and yet divergent from that of patients during doctor's examinations [19] or equally situations of apprenticeship [20]. Ricky guides how I should assess this transition "see that's like too long a dissolve" (frame 2 of Transcript 1). "See" not being an instruction to look at it, but to understand the problem with it. If I do "see" the excessive duration it is because I understand its problematic nature in relationship to both what is witnessable but also what a seasoned home-movie marker would judge to be the right length (on photographers visual expertise [21]). It further derives this character from being said while the transition is still underway so that I am instructed to see it that way while it is still playing. Once the transition is over then I could no longer have that direct access to the clip because video disappears once it stops being played [22].

'So::' said hearably quieter by Ricky (in the 4th frame of Transcript 1) than the preceding negative assessment, projects that what will be undertaken next is a course of action to remedy the negative assessment of his own actions [23]. For me, at the time, the 'so' elicits what seems to be an unexpected remark that 'three seconds will not feel too rushed'. This though is in response to my following his ongoing actions on the screen. Ricky is moving the cursor toward the box where he can type up transition lengths and my response, projecting where the cursor is likely going for, is to the number currently in the box: "5.0" (the cursor and box is marked with red circle in Transcript 1). This was the default transition length set by the editing software. My suggestion of three seconds supports Ricky's assessment of the clip as too long. A suggestion that of course, responds to the assessment provided by Ricky earlier. Nevertheless Ricky does not break from the task begun with 'so::' and replies with a similarly low-pitched 'yeah':
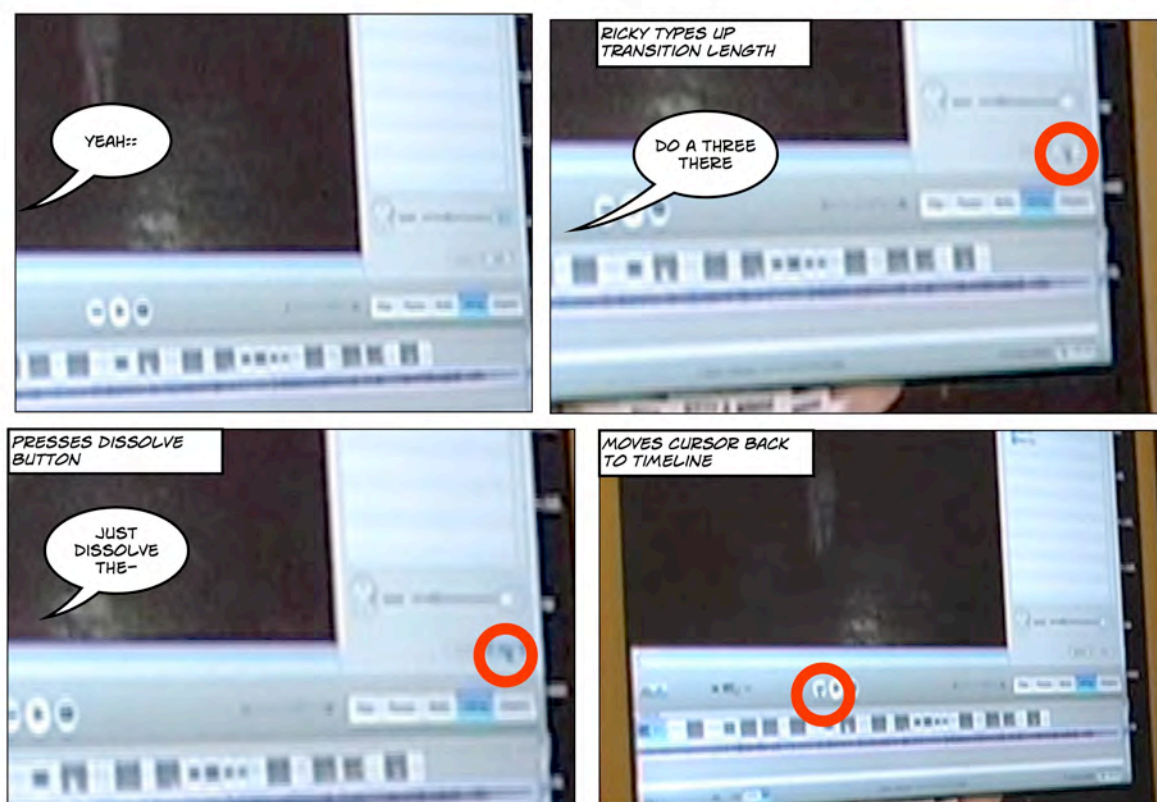
Transcript 2 (continues directly from Transcript 1) – Changing the length of the dissolve

Ricky continues to provide a commentary on his on-screen actions as he applies the new transition length and selects it as a dissolve effect (the cursor is circled in red). What the cross-cut dissolve creates when extended for long enough is a third object. You have, in effect, layered one clip on top of the other with some transparency. When the clip is less than a second then, while the roughness of the immediate transition is imperceptibly smoothed there is no awareness of what the blending of the two clips looks like. The rapid dissolve solves a technical problem but adds no aesthetic dimension. At five seconds the third object began to supplant the other two, so, having reduced the dissolve we prepare to watch the transition again:

Transcript 3 (continues directly from Transcript 2) – Investigating aesthetic value in the dissolve

'Something quite unusual' has caught our attention in watching the three second dissolve. Rogue's fur is picked out from the darkness by the torch (see the third frame of Transcript 3). We are beginning to realise, that the dark of the unlit lane that Ricky and Rogue walk along, provides, in effect, a mask for the footage. It is functioning somewhat like the blue or green backgrounds for chroma-keying in studios. 'Unusual' effects are produced when the cross-cut dissolve is applied to this night-time footage. Where there is black dissolving into black then there is *no* dissolve for that part of the image. As our editing progresses the unusual effect appears over and over again.

His assessment of what the transition does as 'quite unusual' is not a clear positive or negative assessment. In fact it's a form of assessment that renders it as something worth investigating. Ricky's tag question (e.g. 'innit') seeks an explanatory response from me. Prefacing what I am about to say with a tentative "hmm" I provide a formulation of what we can see: 'him and his fur and the darkness' (see also [24]). Noticing an anomaly provides for an explanation of that anomaly. We are both withholding any final assessment of the worth of the anomaly. There is then here a discovery in the re-viewing of the transition, rather than assessing the black-to-

black transition in terms of a problem that will require an adjustment to fix it (as was the case with the transition's five second duration), it is being considered as offering the video something distinctive.

There is also a change of participation framework in the editing here and one that is easier to see when you see the bodily configuration around the screen and keyboard:

Transcript 4 (another camera perspective of transcript 3) – Embodying the investigation and assessment

Having been leant in, over the keyboard, engaged in working on the movie, Ricky then sits back and folds his arms and, while the sequence continues to replay, turns to me. This two-part shift is, in its first part, when he shifts back to reflect on his work and, in its second part, to bring me in, to see how I respond to the "unusual". It is also literally a move away from the work to provide a different perspective on it. A stepping back from the object being worked on, the stance that we would also see taken by the craftsman building a wooden boat in his garage. It initiates a review of the work that has been done so far, a review that involves stopping one's labour on whatever it is that one is making. It is that moment where Ricky and his ethnographer are looking at the video footage in a different way, appraising it *in vivo*. That is, this is the maker's assessment that occurs during the making, something quite distinct from forms of review, assessment and evaluation or, more broadly, deliberation that occur in the more familiar occasions when a professional critic has watched a finished filmic object. Ricky is thinking about what to do next, what to do with or about the black-to-black transition. After a few more transitions we decide that it's unusual *and* interesting. The darkness and the torchlight is, in fact, what saves the initially unpromising footage and creates what Jamie Lorimer has called disconcerting video [25].

Part 4.

> "*Animal laborans* is, as the name implies, the human being akin to a beast of burden, a drudge condemned to routine. Arendt enriched this image by imagining him or her absorbed in a task that shuts out the world, a state well exemplified by Oppenheimer's feeling that the atomic bomb was a "sweet" problem, or Eichmann's obsession with making the gas chambers efficient. In the act of making it work, nothing else matters; *Animal laborans* takes the work as an end in itself." [26]

Richard Sennett's book on making and craft - 'The Craftsman' - begins, and ends, with a lament over Hannah Arendt's having failed to see the value of craft in her classic work "The Human Condition"[26]. In human geography Arendt's ideas remains little used, having been picked up in only a handful of works on public space [27], ethics [28] and politics [29]. While Sennett praises her over her remarkable political analysis and her inspirational teaching he finds her inadequate in her dealings with the material world. And worse, she divided labour from thinking, the making of a thing from judgement of the thing, *Animal Laborens* from *Homo Faber*. Sennett's 'more balanced view is that thinking and feeling are contained within the process of making' p7 [26]. By the end of his book Sennett's tone has become angrier with his former teacher 'this study has sought to rescue *Animal Laborens* from the contempt with which Hannah Arendt treated him' p286 [26].

> 'Understanding the inner sequence of development in practicing a craft, the phases of becoming a better craftsman, can counter Hannah Arendt's conviction that *Animal Laborens* is blind' p296 [26]

Having read Sennett's book to help me understand home-movie makers and having enjoyed his retrieval of craft, materials and tools, I found myself curious as to whether Arendt treated *Animal Laborens* with the contempt that Sennett described. From what little I knew of her work it seemed unlikely.

Arendt argues not that *animal laborens* is blind but that 'laboring always moves in the same circle, which is prescribed by the biological process of the living organism and the end of its 'toil and trouble' comes only with the death of the organism' [30]p98. The labourers are those whose work never ends. Trapped like the horses turning the mill wheels, they do not make anything. Their toil is not preserved and does not endure, it serves only to hoist the loads, pull the weeds or glue the ends of film stock together. Sennett mistakenly equates *animal laborens* with craftsmen or makers, whereas for Arendt crafts people are *homo faber* and from there Sennett has consequently misunderstood the central message of the *Human Condition.*

Homo faber fabricates or makes, theirs is a practice that comes to an end with the completion of its object that can be added to the stock of the world's objects. By contrast, Arendt re-iterates several times that what characterises the labourer is endless activity, constantly consumed by others and the demands of life. In the Human Condition, Arendt's lament is over the victory of *animal laborens,* the victory of the idea of labour over fabrication:

> 'The ideals of *homo faber*, the fabricator of the world, which are permanence, stability, and durability, have been sacrificed to abundance, the ideal of *animal laborans*.' We live in a laborer society'. p126 [30]

The problem Arendt identifies is that *making* becomes regarded as merely 'another form of laboring, a more complicated but not a more mysterious function of the life process' [30] p322 Arendt's book is a lengthy response to the vision of society's problems presented by the then dominant figure in the social sciences and social reform - Marx. It is also a response to the emergence of a consumer society and, finally, the economic idea of value. It is a book about how a maker's products may be greater than the maker themselves, enduring beyond their life and making 'a place fit for action and speech' of others. *Homo Faber* is the producer of the enduring materiality of the world. It is unfortunate that Sennett, the pupil, should have so thoroughly misremembered the critique at the heart of his teacher's work because he then adopts it as if it were his.

Ricky remains modest about the video of his dog that he has fabricated, 'this'll not win us any oscars'. It is, after all, not so much a home-movie but rather a home-made movie cobbled together with what could be gathered in and around the house. A home-made movie fabricated with a big dog, a powerful torch, an amateur camcorder and thirty cross-cut dissolves. And yet, as I have hopefully provided a sense of from his editing work, Ricky crafts the video together with care and with reason and reflection. In Arendt's description of *homo faber's* work there is stage where the thing is made and is being added to the growing stock of videos that endure, sometimes beyond the life of their maker. Given the centrality of the term "animal", if there is something missing in Arendt's examination of the figures of *homo faber* and *animal laborens* it is a valuing of the animal beyond being beasts of burden or being merely a figure for the invidious comparison between them and the human. There is minimal welcome for the animal in the Human Condition [30]. Ricky on the other hand has not only brought the animal into his home but has brought him onto the public affairs of home on Youtube. To put it another way, not only, then, is Ricky devoted to trying to make a thing, a well-enough made thing, to the world, he is trying to add Rogue to the store of lives that the world remembers and values.

"This'll not win us any oscars", there is more to this remark by Ricky. His making of his Rogue videos is not quite that of the craftsperson producing an object for it to be useful. The home video is not a chair for sitting in nor a pair of gloves to keep us warm. While he is not claiming that the home-movie is an artistic product of high enough quality to garner awards it is still part of that endeavour to perhaps produce something immortal. It is in the sections on producing works of art (section 23 of [26]) that Sennett's remarks have a little more traction because Arendt does distinguish a limited utilitarian attitude in *homo faber* but only then to then show how *homo faber* in pursuing excellence exceeds the merely utilitarian. It is utilitarianism that is the problem not the crafts person.

> If the *animal laborans* needs the help of *homo faber* to ease his labor and remove his pain, and if mortals need his help to erect a home on earth, acting and speaking men need the help of *homo faber* in his highest capacity, that is, the help of the artist, of poets and historiographers, of monument-builders or writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all. [30] p173

In the multitude of movies of pets that populate Youtube we see, then, that desire to not merely provide a home on earth for companion animals but to help them also, in the face of life's essential futility, to be immortalised.

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